

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR, 1987–94

Howard L. Oleck*

Sanders `an asset'

Friday, July 3, 1987¹

Editor: Jacquin Sanders' June 25 column about “former KGB agent” and the “Citizens for America” tax-exempt organization was a delightful example of good reporting and comment. His gentle spoofing of right wing extremism was kindly, considering the rhetoric that was sounded off that evening.

I was there by invitation of a leading ACLU lawyer, to hear what a “KGB defector” might have to say. The “Citizens for America” speakers' presentations were unexpected frosting on the cake. My reaction was astonishment at how similar extremists of both the right and left sound at a rubber chicken banquet. Both shout about how noble *they* are, and how *ignoble* anyone who disagrees with them is. Scratch almost *any* extremist and you'll find a would-be dictator.

Sanders is consistently good; an asset to any newspaper. He deserves applause.

* This compilation is representative of the letters Howard Oleck wrote to the editors of the *St. Petersburg Times*. These letters were published between 1987–94.

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A mixture fraught with dangerSaturday, July 23, 1988²

Editor: Jeanne Pugh's article *Church, state line blurs for myopic denominations* in the July 9 issue of the *Times* is a masterpiece of American journalism. It is a brilliant short analysis of today's dangerous mixing of church and state by some misguided and some ambitious religionists. It is particularly timely as the 1988 political campaign heats up.

The Mormon Church is wise to warn its members of the dangers of using church resources to win political power-dangers to the nation and to the church of the people who try that route to power. At the same time it is a clarion warning to those religionists who are willing to endanger their nation and their church in reckless pursuit of political power.

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Duke and Publicity

Monday, March 6, 1989³

Editor: Mr. David Duke, of the Louisiana legislature, the young advocate of the horrible ideas of Adolf Hitler, is licking his chops over the banquet of publicity he is getting, the meat and drink of politicians today more than ever in this age of mass-media.

The media people lick their chops over their opportunity for “a good story,” a real good “shocker” that wins salary raises and sells their products — by making “a celebrity.”

The supposedly nobler souls sneer at the low fellow's blatherings, and “view with alarm,” while trying to cash in on the story. If they can get some short range benefits from it, they do not worry much about the long range disaster that they may be helping to bring to us all — by making “a celebrity”!

So it always seems to be with humans, down through the ages. Individual self-interest seems to be willing to ruin humanity for the sake of immediate personal gain, in all but a few people.

Seldom does one see so clear an example of the eternal truism that “Those who will not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”

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Opinion

Sunday, February 11, 1990⁴

The Bass group lawsuit against the *St. Petersburg Times* really illustrates the great economic-law dilemma of today:

Does "ownership" mean constitutionally protected *individual power*, or does it mean "custody" (fiduciary, like a trustee) subject to the interests of the *community*? Put otherwise, is the "community interest" a legal right, more important than the property/power owner's legal right?

If 40 percent stock ownership of voting stock means 40 percent control of everything, *absolutely*, then the community interest in the Times-Poynter corporation's mixture of profit and nonprofit purposes/operations may be ended in order to give the 40 percent stock owner 40 percent of the income.

If 40 percent voting stock ownership means power held "in trust" as it affects the community, with public interest causing the fiduciary nature of ownership to be paramount here, then the owner must be content with much less.

It seems against public interest to let owners even threaten to destroy "public utilities." It is long past time for the courts to so

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declare, even if the Congress or the president will not to do so.

With rights come duties

Saturday, May 8, 1993⁵

A “Bill of Duties” to match the Bill of Rights in our Constitution is what this country needs now. Endless emphasis on rights and entitlements in the past few decades has sapped the energy and endurance of our people, and may be fatal if not soon balanced by new emphasis on obligations and duties of free people.

A starting point for a constitutional convention of 1993 might well be to consider adopting new amendments such as these:

1. Duty to serve in time of war or civil commotion;
2. Duty to support children and family, and pay taxes;
3. Duty to vote and perform civic duties, set by Congress;
4. Duty to educate self and dependents, and limit population;
5. Duty to protect and improve the environment;
6. Duty to aid police and other public services;
7. Duty to seek/accept disabling treatment for chronic criminality;
8. Duty to respect persons of other race, creed, sex, and respect

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animals;

9. Duty to contribute to public charities and services;

10. Duty to report observed violations of law;
(and perhaps)

11. Duty to do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Moral courage

Thursday, August 19, 1993⁶

Elijah Gosier's column about *Judgments in black and white* in the Aug. 7 issue of the *Times* made me feel sad for the human race. A newspaper story about whites' fears in a neighborhood of mostly blacks' residences, and of blacks' fears in a neighborhood of mostly whites' residences is an "echo" kind of story, either way. We are all prey to our indoctrination, either way. That indoctrination always seems to be: "Beware of the person who is different from you in any way. Only *your* (our) kind is the good kind. All other kinds are enemies."

In a primitive society that kind of thinking is at least understandable—the result of animal fear of anything different from one's own clan.

But in today's crowded civilization such barbarism is no longer

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tolerable. Certainly everything I say is old stuff. But we must do more than bemoan hatefulness. We must act, each in his/her own life. We must no longer shrug off bigotry.

It is up to everyone, every time, to speak up when we hear or see bigotry. It is our duty to say to the speaker/writer: “That is a nasty, rotten thing. I cannot be silent about it. You are free to hate, but I do not have to listen to it. Goodbye.”

It is not easy to act courageously in these cases. But if we do not make such moral courage the custom of decent people, we will surely reap the whirlwinds that bigotry always produces. We must actually do the right thing.

`Enough already'

Sunday, May 15, 1994⁷

The *Times'* Clay Bennett cartoon of President Clinton's desk calendar list of “cold shower” schedules does have one cleansing effect: It makes decent people want to wash their hands of such slime.

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A sad day for both sides

Tuesday, November 1, 1994⁸

Re: *Brothers, memories, Kent State*, Oct. 25, by Mark Albright, about the Kent State shooting of students in 1970, rewrites one bit of history, though mostly the history is accurate.

Twice the column says that the National Guardsmen “shot into a mob of students on the run.” But it does not disclose that the students were a mob, throwing rocks and bottles at the men, then running and returning to throw more and run again. Also, as the guardsmen were novice soldiers, emphasis should be placed on the

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recklessness of attacking armed men who were not cool-headed police.

Also, having just burned down the ROTC barracks, the students had no right to expect endless toleration, from amateur warriors, for more attacks.

A few days after this event, some of the Kent State students asked me to sue the state of Ohio for them for their injuries. I was a law professor at Cleveland State and, thus, a state employee-hardly the right lawyer for this claim. I advised them to get other counsel, suggested the law firm that did take the case and advised them that I expected them to lose the case. They did.

As a (almost four-year draftee) veteran of World War II, I cannot feel really deep empathy with Americans who pick and choose when (if ever) they will do their duty to serve in the armed forces of the nation. Demonstrating against a political policy is one thing. Attacking the guardsmen is another. It was a sad day for both sides.